A Trip Plan saved our lives!

By MSgt Jon Scudder, Elmendorf AFB, Alaska

Sometimes even the best of plans go bad. That was the case for three Elmendorf aircraft maintainers who went on a 4-day hunting trip at a remote lake near Glennallen, Alaska.

MSgt Eric Hoffman, SrAs Dave Strunk and Kevin White, all from the 3rd Equipment Maintenance Squadron, were airlifted back to Kulis Air National Guard Base by the 210th Rescue Squadron after Mother Nature confronted the group with heavy snow, sub-zero temperatures and thin ice.

However, a combination of the group's preparation, quality equipment, and a thorough trip plan is credited with saving their lives and minimizing rescue efforts.

The veteran hunters, who have hunted with each other before, began their trip after leaving their truck the morning of January 4th at Mile 75 of the Richardson Highway, approximately 200 miles from Elmendorf.

They unloaded their three snow machines and two sleds for the 13-mile remote trek to an old trapper's cabin where they had planned to hunt "predators," such as coyotes, foxes and wolves.

Their trouble started early on when heavy snow bogged down the snow machines towing their two sleds. "We'd go a mile and get one stuck," said Hoffman, referring to the waist-high, unpacked snow.

"It expends a lot of energy to lift those sleds," added Hoffman. "You just can't move the track over as if you weren't towing a sled. You have to unhook the sled, move the snow machine, and then drag the heavy sled over. We were getting a pretty good workout."

After a few hours, they came upon a small creek normally frozen solid this time of year.

"We went down this creek about 30 yards and got ready to come back up on the bank when two of the snow machines broke through the ice," said Hoffman, who was surprised the ice was thin because of the bone-chilling conditions.

Looking back at the situation, Hoffman, an 11-year Alaskan resident, believes it was caused by the warm spell followed by a thick layer of insulating snow that kept the ice from freezing solid.

"It was in a spot where the water was about waist deep. I've never seen a hole in that creek that deep before," said Hoffman, who makes the trip regularly throughout the year.

"Two snow machines sunk up to the engine cowling," said Hoffman, referring to the front cover of the snow machine. "It took us about 2 hours to winch them out. At about 20 below zero, everything froze almost immediately. We had ice in the cylinders and carburetors — the exhaust manifolds and pipes were frozen solid."

The group was now about 2 miles from the cabin, darkness was moving in and the snow was chest level. Instead of trying to negotiate the trail in darkness, the group stayed the night with their snow machines and equipment.

"Our topnotch equipment made a huge difference," said Strunk, referring to their gear bought from a recognized outdoor retailer versus that from a mass marketer. "It made the difference between us being comfortable instead of being miserable."

Realizing their dire situation, the group came to a consensus.

"We made the decision that we all came in together, and we were all going out together," said Hoffman. "We weren't going to risk getting separated and one of us making a run out and breaking down without equipment."

The next day the group tried to get the remaining snow machine to the cabin. However, it bogged down in the snow.

Hoffman said they then decided to go the last part on foot punching through what had become chest-deep snow.

"I don't think I've ever been that exhausted in my life," said Hoffman. "All three of us are in pretty good shape. I don't know if we would have made it if it weren't for our physical conditioning."

The group reached the remote cabin several hours later and managed to light a fire using prepositioned supplies, such as wood, food, and gasoline. "It felt darned good to get a good meal and a warm fire," he added.

The group decided to rest the next day and set out the following morning to try and repair the snow machines. Two feet of snow fell overnight, forcing them to renegotiate the path they previously made.

After hours of drying out the parts with a propane torch, they got a second machine running before they headed back to the cabin. "We would get to the snow machines about 9:30 a.m. and work until 3 p.m.," said Hoffman.

This daily ritual began again Jan. 7, the day they were supposed to be heading home. "Dave's machine was much worse," said Hoffman. "Everything was filled with ice. We thawed out the parts we could and decided to take the rest to the cabin where we could work on them."

Hoffman knew they weren't going to make it out that night, but was confident his wife would start calling the proper agencies, based on the group's thorough trip plan.

He thought the Alaska State Troopers might fly over, but said he didn't realize at the time that everyone else in the vicinity was socked in with snow as well, preventing any possible flight.

After letting the snow machine parts dry out on the wood stove overnight, the group returned to the broken machine the next day.

"We got it running but couldn't keep it running," said Hoffman. "We kept messing with it and finally realized some silt had gotten into the carburetor. We were getting hammered by the wind-driven snow; so we decided to head back to the cabin."

The trio went to bed early and about midnight heard a helicopter flying over their cabin.

"We went outside to signal the aircrew with a lantern and a pararescueman rappelled down to us," Hoffman said. "The PJ told us our truck was under 3 feet of snow preventing any possibility of driving out. He gave us about 5 minutes to close up the cabin.

"It was probably the greatest ride I've ever had ... and I've ridden in an F-15 Eagle," said Hoffman. "The PJs were a very professional group. We did a C-130 aerial refueling, got back to Kulis at 2:30 a.m., and were back to work at 7 a.m."

Lt Col John Jacobs, chief of the 11th Air Force Rescue Coordination Center at Fort Richardson, Alaska, credits the group for the swift rescue.

"The individuals rescued are an example of how to survive a mishap in the Alaskan outdoors. They left a trip plan and were well prepared for the unexpected.

"They exercised good operational risk management throughout their ordeal," he added. "This not only contributed to their successful recovery, but allowed the rescuers to minimize some risks involved in the rescue. The rescuers knew exactly where to go, what to look for, and avoided needless hours searching in hazardous terrain on night vision goggles."

Hoffman credits the trip plan for the quick emergency response and it being a necessity for those venturing out in Alaska's unforgiving wilderness.

"They knew exactly where to find us," said Hoffman. "In fact, the PJs said they came right to us. You have to have a great appreciation for the outdoors in Alaska. It's almost mind-blowing how vast the wilderness is here. It's unlike the Lower 48 where there's a logging road or a trail around — up here there's not."

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Photo by A1C Joanna Reihle

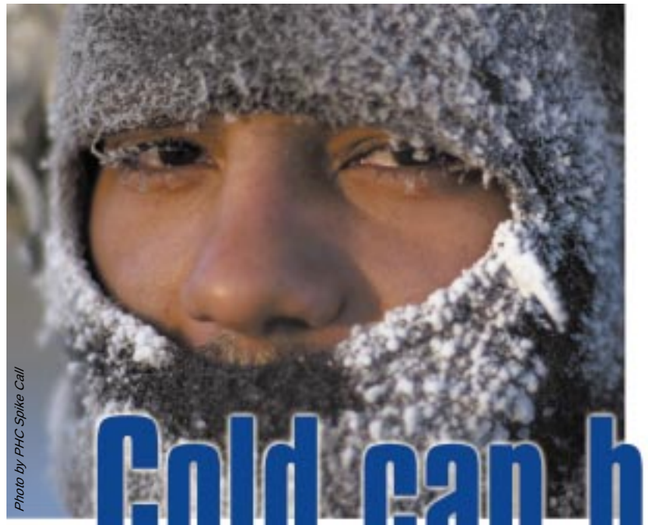

Photo by PHC Spike Call

Cold can hurt!

By Julie Shelley, Fort Rucker, Ala.

A popular motivational anecdote goes something like this: "That which does not kill you makes you stronger." How many times have you heard that one? While this oft-quoted line might have some fundamental truth, it forgets to mention that those things that don't kill you often hurt a lot.

Cold-weather operations present many hazards that, if not approached correctly, can lead to disaster: severe cold injuries, carbon monoxide poisoning, and tent fires, just to name a few. But, the winter environment also introduces other, not-so-serious risks that can increase pain and decrease productivity. These minor aches and pains are not only a nuisance; they are also costly in terms of lost man-hours and dollars.

Fortunately, most cold injuries are completely preventable if appropriate, precautionary measures are taken. Be on the lookout for these symptoms and seek the proper medical treatment if you or one of your people exhibits any of the following.

Frostnip

This type of injury, along with more serious ailments such as frostbite, can occur anytime the air temperature is below freezing. Frostnip is caused by water freezing on the skin's surface. In exposed skin, the risk of a freezing injury increases with higher wind speeds.

Frostnipped skin will appear red and possibly swollen. Although painful, frostnip generally is limited to the skin's surface — the face, ears, and extremities being particularly vulnerable — and causes no further damage after the affected area is re-warmed. However, repeated frostnip in the same spot can dry and crack the skin, making it very sensitive. It also is important to note that distinguishing between frostnip and frostbite can be very difficult. Frostnip must be taken very seriously and all frostnip injuries should be reported immediately.

Sunburn

You don't have to be in the desert or at the beach to get sunburned — the threat of sunburn depends on the intensity of sunlight, not air temperature. Add in snow, ice, and lightly colored objects, all of which reflect the sun's rays, and the scene is set for a major sunburn injury if you're not careful. Sunburned skin will be painful and hot to the touch, appear red, and possibly swollen and blistered.

To prevent sunburn anytime of the year and in all environments, use sunscreen with a sun protection factor of at least 15 and cover all exposed skin. In cold weather, sunscreen should be alcohol-free. If you should become sunburned, prevent further exposure and apply a moisturizing lotion; aspirin or acetaminophen may be given for pain. People with large areas of injured or blistered skin should be evacuated for medical treatment.

Snow blindness

Snow blindness, like sunburn, is a threat posed by the intensity of the sun's rays, not the temperature outside. Solar radiation can "sunburn" unprotected eyes, leading to snow blindness. Symptoms of snow blindness include painful, gritty eyes with profuse tearing, blurred vision, and possibly, a headache. People suffering from snow blindness should be removed from direct sunlight and allowed to rest in a dark area with their eyes covered by cool, wet bandages until they can be evacuated. Bacitracin or erythromycin ophthalmic ointment also should be applied.

Protective eyewear or goggles that block at least 90 percent of ultraviolet radiation can help prevent snow blindness, and sunglasses with visible light transmittance in the 5 to 10 percent range are needed to reduce the sun's reflection off snow. In addition to protective eyewear, sideshields or deeply wrapped lens designs should be used to reduce the chances of eye injury.

Editor's Note: *Courtesy of the Army Safety Center*